

DEATHRIDE: Hitler vs. Stalin: the Eastern Front, 1941-1945

A Review

[Joseph Bishop](#)

by John Mosier, Simon & Schuster, New York, 470 pages, 2010.

Numerous histories of the titanic 1940s armed struggle between Germany and the Soviet Union have been presented to the mainstream reading public over the last half century or so, and for the most part they follow the same pattern: Germany, led by its mad, greedy for conquest Führer, made a surprise attack on the USSR. The Germans made many quick gains and easy victories over an unsuspecting Russian foe. But as the Russians recovered from their initial surprise, they marshaled their unlimited resources in manpower and factory production and fought back, gradually forcing the invaders back across the frontiers and ultimately defeating the Nazi menace pretty much single-handed. The Germans became weaker in all areas while the Russians grew ever stronger, making the former's defeat inevitable. The western Allies helped, but it was the Russians who overwhelmingly defeated the Nazi menace. So goes the received script.

A quantity of Soviet documents and reams of statistics seem to back up Stalin's claims of how the war went. Most western historians have accepted their veracity and routinely cite them, even today in the most recent works, e.g. with David Glantz's numerous studies of the various battles in the east. Earlier historians such as John Erickson did the same, offering their works to be somewhat incestuously drawn upon by later writers, establishing this Stalin-inspired version as writ. Those few historians contradicting this received script have found themselves and their work branded as 'controversial' and their theses and ideas generally rejected or treated with contempt.



A German Grenadier on the Eastern Front stares into the camera. Was the war between Germany and the Soviet Union begun as a surprise attack by a greedy-for-conquest Führer or a pre-emptive strike on a Soviet predator poised to invade Germany and Europe? Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-B29906 / CC-BY-SA [CC-BY-SA-3.0-de (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/deed.en)], via Wikimedia Commons

John Mosier is one such, whose recent works *The Myth of the Great War*, *The Blitzkrieg Myth*, and *Cross of Iron* have consistently established the point that deeper and more objective research reveals a quite different reality to common presumptions about Germany's two major wars. But his latest work *Deathride* is bound to land him in serious hot water. The surprises are many. Instead of a mad dictator greedy to conquer the world and making endless blunders, Hitler is presented as a sane and rational man making sensible and very smart decisions, understanding strategy and global politics far better than his generals. Instead of a surprise attack on the innocent Russians, Mosier has concluded that the war was a pre-emptive strike on a predator poised to invade Germany and Europe. Victor Suvarov—the author of the path-breaking work *Icebreaker* and the later *Chief Culprit*—and Joachim Hoffmann—author of *Stalin's War of Extermination*—are cited respectfully as important sources. That alone is a major surprise, as most historians either reject their findings with contempt, or simply ignore their work completely. The very idea of assigning real blame for the war to the Soviets instead of to Hitler flies in the face of too many verities, and is usually treated as a taboo.

"The most recent evidence confirms what German interrogations of captured Soviet officers revealed in 1941, that Stalin was in fact planning to attack Hitler at the first opportune moment. For approximately fifty years this idea has been either dismissed as beneath contempt or savagely attacked, despite the fact that it conforms to the pattern of Soviet behavior both before 1939 and after 1945.

So the recent evidence contradicts a long established Stalinist legend, and certainly explains Hitler's motivation: his attack on the Soviet Union was a preemptive strike." (p.82)

and

"A summary of the key interrogations and the deductions of the interrogators, taken from the Wehrmacht records, is contained in Joachim Hoffmann, Stalin's War of Extermination, 1941-1945: Planning, Realization, Documentation, translated by William Diest (Capshaw, Alabama, Theses and Dissertations Press, 2005), 80-88... In 1990, Victor Rezhun, a defector who had been an officer in Soviet military intelligence, writing under the pseudonym Suvarov, published Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War, translated by Thomas Beattie (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1990). He summarized Stalin's plans and offered as proof the dispositions of the Red Army in forward positions (those dispositions are corroborated by the Wehrmacht interrogations also summarized by Hoffmann, Stalin's War of Extermination, 65-70). After the collapse of the USSR the intentions enumerated in Hoffmann and Suvarov were confirmed, most notably by Pleshakov (Stalin's Folly), but by other Russian scholars as well (see the extensive citation in Stalin's Folly, 285)." (note 49/p.397)

A common tendency of German generals after the war was to go along with many of these assumptions. They sought to distance themselves from Hitler and National Socialism, presenting him as a sort of pied piper who misled and then forced them into the war. According to this self-serving version, all the things that went wrong were due to Hitler's crazy decisions and meddlings, while all that went right were as a result of the genius of the generals themselves. The objective was firstly to protect their own reputations, secondly to protect the image of the German General Staff, and thirdly to simply survive in

post-war Germany and shore up their relationship with the conquerors, particularly the USA, which occupied—and arguably continues to occupy—defeated Germany.

Mosier points out that in nearly all cases, Hitler was right in his decisions while his generals were wrong. The German officer caste was trained to seize major cities and especially capitals, but Hitler understood that modern wars were more economic in nature—conflicts to seize resources both to deny the enemy the ability to wage war while at the same time increasing one's own ability to do so. The author states that Hitler's generals simply could not comprehend this view.

"One of Hitler's accurate complaints about his generals was they understood nothing about 'the economic aspects of warfare'; the generalization could be extended into areas outside of economics." (p.31)

and

"The army commanders from the very first had envisioned the objective of a war with Russia in a traditional way: destruction of the armies and occupations of the old and new capitals, especially Moscow.", Mosier citing from Heinz Guderian's Panzer Leader: "[Hitler] said that the raw materials and agriculture of Ukraine were vitally necessary for the future prosecution of the war. He spoke once again of the need of neutralizing the Crimea, 'the Soviet aircraft carrier for attacking the Rumanian oilfields.' For the first time I heard him use the phrase: 'My generals know nothing about the economic aspects of war.' [cited from Panzer Leader, Da Capo edition 1996, p.200]" (pp.131-2)

His analysis of the Stalin-inspired Soviet myths is replete with a careful study of both German and Russian records. In his view, the German records are quite accurate and were kept in painstaking detail. Far from a German military growing weaker in both manpower and armor etc. year by year, he demonstrates that it progressively grew stronger in troops, armor, in all forms of effective firepower, and in quality of leadership both tactical and strategic. The Russian resources, presented as limitless and leaping in strength, were steadily diminishing. Their troops were perishing in the tens of millions thanks to Stalin's orders for continual frontal attacks everywhere, while their armor was being steadily 'shredded' by German firepower and tactics. Even the official Soviet statistics of losses and production figures reveal many inconsistencies and anomalies which when coupled with his examination of the far more accurate German figures, enabled Mosier to provide a truer picture of what was happening.

What is revealed is that the casualties on both sides reflected a ratio of about 5:1 favoring the German forces. With a USSR population of about 170 million at that time and a German population of close to 100 million, the Russians could not long sustain a ratio of greater than 2:1. In other words, the attrition rate was bleeding Russia dry in manpower. Hitler understood this and wisely strove to continue the process. Hence his 'stand fast' orders in 1941 and later, causing further attritive combats resulting in tremendous disparities in losses, again favoring Germany.

Armor and firepower production and usage are carefully examined. Mosier shows that while the Soviets claimed wildly huge tank production figures, not only were the real figures much lower, but the tanks themselves had endless problems. Their operational life was often measured in days or even hours before breakdowns and failures would occur. The Russians produced tanks but not much in the way of

spare parts. They produced no recovery vehicles at all, and workshop and repair facilities were almost unknown. The German armor was usually higher in quality and was maintained well, damaged vehicles being quickly recovered and put back into service. The disparities in performance on the battlefield were not much different from the manpower-loss ratios.

Mosier provides a study of other forms of mobile German firepower which strictly speaking were not normally classified as 'armor' as their guns could only be elevated and lowered, lacking moveable turrets. Assault guns, self-propelled artillery, mobile anti-aircraft guns, tank destroyers, and other new weapons were produced in ever greater quantities and deployed in independent units assigned to support infantry or to supplement the panzer divisions. Sometimes rejected by panzer generals, e.g., Guderian and others, as an unwelcome innovation, they were nonetheless tremendously successful in destroying many thousands of Soviet tanks and breaking up troop concentrations, stalling major Soviet offensives time and again while further amplifying the aforesaid losses ratios.

The author shows that the German troops and officers were well-trained and got better at tactics and strategy as the war progressed, while Soviet troops and officers generally remained poorly trained and prepared and even more poorly led. Mosier frankly presents the Soviet military as generally incompetent, continuing to take huge losses and suffer countless major and minor defeats right up to the end of the war. He also takes aim at the reputations of Soviet Marshals Zhukov, Koniev, and others, seeing them as certainly overrated as well as rather dishonest in their own memoirs of the war.

So how could the Soviets have won the war then? Mosier shows how, firstly, the USSR received tremendous amounts of lend-lease and other forms of aid from the USA and Britain. Trucks, aircraft, American tanks, fuel oils, food, all was amply, even hugely provided to the Soviets and indeed saved them from destruction at the hands of the Germans—all contrary to the Stalinist myth that said aid was insignificant and played little or no role in the Red Army's defeat of the Wehrmacht. Secondly, in spite of Stalin's repeated demands for an Allied 'second front' to take the pressure off Russia, in point of fact several such fronts were already draining Germany's resources—a second front in the air over Germany itself, a third front in the Battle of the Atlantic, a fourth front in the war in North Africa and then Sicily and Italy—all before the fifth front D-Day invasion of France in June 1944.

The author conclusively shows that what really gave the Soviets the edge was the steady switching of Germany's best units from the eastern front to other theatres in the west, to the Balkans, to France, to Italy, and elsewhere, in response to real or expected threats from the Allies, units including the famed 'Grossdeutschland' division, the 'Leibstandarte' and other leading SS divisions, and other units possessing the best equipment. The Wehrmacht was ultimately stripped of the firepower it needed in the east and its role then became largely defensive. The Soviet myth of a rock-solid Red Army steadily and victoriously pushing the Germans back everywhere, falls flat on its face in Mosier's analysis.

"Compounding the difficulties of the German commanders was Hitler's determination to respond to perceived threats elsewhere. In August, the German high command, reacting to the Dieppe raid, went into a panic and shifted Germany's premier super-unit, the Leibstandarte armored SS division, to France. In fact, Berlin intended to ship the army's premier combat force, the Grossdeutschland, there as well, and the overstretched Luftwaffe was diverting valuable resources to the Mediterranean in response to the Allied invasion there. Given the German dependence on tactical airpower, the decision was bad news indeed. The omens for Stalin were favorable." (pp.209-10)

Operation *Zitadelle* in summer 1943—also known as the Battle of Kursk—was the last major German offensive in the east. Hitler ordered disengagement at a point where some German generals believed they were poised at a major breakthrough and victory—again in order to switch units to meet threats elsewhere away from Russia. Mosier regards this as an unusual error on Hitler's part, but a decision or set of decisions entirely rational and understandable. Thus Kursk is often seen as the turning point in the east, a point beyond which Germany's tide there would ebb.

Mosier also draws numerous other interesting conclusions.

Germany's failure to develop and mass-produce a strategic bomber in his view spelled doom for the war against Stalin. However, he makes clear that Germany very nearly completely defeated the Soviets without it in 1941, and that it was mainly only the very generous aid from the USA that enabled the USSR to survive at all, thus that without such a bomber the war would likely have been won by Germany anyway.

He believes that the partisan war in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus was little more than a nuisance to the Germans and never constituted a major threat. In this regard he points out that most of the Soviet civilian losses during the war were a direct result of Stalin's orders and not German actions per se, as he commanded uprisings and reprisals everywhere behind the lines, most of which were snuffed out by German forces with few losses to themselves but major losses to the Russians.

An interesting and unique conclusion drawn by the author is that the Soviet Union's gigantic manpower losses and physical destruction suffered during the war, ultimately led to the collapse of communism in that country several decades later. If this is so, then Adolf Hitler is the man or agent to be credited with that seminal event. But at the very least, he did in fact prevent most of Europe from being overrun by Stalin's henchmen in 1941—something which almost no one today is willing to admit. [see Mosier's detailed, convincing discussion of the long-term social and economic effects of the manpower losses, pp.364-367]

Mosier's close look at the nature of Soviet 'truth' and 'reality', coupled with Stalin's unique style of leadership, is quite revealing. Stalin would typically make a political pronouncement about the war, or the economy, or on production, etc., and his underlings would be expected to then produce reports and statistics, i.e. 'facts', affirming Stalin's 'reality'. These then would find their way into the archives, to be later used by historians, journalists, and others seeking to determine wartime numbers and trends—even doubters of the veracity of said material would often use it anyway on the basis of 'there is nothing else to work with', thus reinforcing and perpetuating Stalin's myths. His successors, e.g. Nikita Khrushchev, selectively perpetuated the myths too if they found them useful; thus Khrushchev's famous speeches and statements denouncing Stalin's crimes in the GULAG and 'Great Terror' purges did not extend to a denunciation of the various myths surrounding the 'Great Patriotic War' which remained of use—and still remain of use—to the Russian leadership right down to the present day. Similar myths about World War II serving America's ruling elite, were—and still are—also perpetuated.

Stalin himself would not accept contradiction and was infamous for punishing those who gave him unpleasant news. One case involved a major leader in Soviet aviation who pointed out to Stalin that the Red Air Force's aircraft were poorly designed and produced and prone to breakdowns and failure; he was arrested, tortured, and executed—Stalin thus setting a salient example to others. The Marxist-Leninist view of the nature of truth itself reveals it as a political construct whose political objective is

always more important than mere actual facts or reality. In an interpretation completely at odds with, and alien to the Western model, the Marxist dictum 'all things are political' dictates that truth, history, literature, everything in fact, must be made to serve the revolutionary goals of Marxism-Leninism. The nature of truth itself thus defined, technically speaking, i.e. at least from their point of view, propounds the idea that Marxists are not technically 'lying' when fabricating myths and scripts about World War II or how the USSR won the war.

Overall, Mosier's work is sure to be found refreshing and pleasantly surprising to revisionists. He even cites some material from the IHR's Journal of Historical Review, as well as some of Walter Sanning's work, both sources heretofore relegated to historiography's outer margin. This book's imprint, Simon & Schuster, is top-drawer, at least for purposes of prestige among readers generally, and Mosier's previous titles seem to have done well in the marketplace. Does this mean that some historians at least, do in fact read and consider the work of revisionists? It must surely be so, inevitably providing a sort of 'trickle down' effect in which revisionist themes, interpretations, and even occasionally facts, reach the mainstream.

Or perhaps all this is ephemeral, to be at some point squelched off or silenced. I wonder if John Mosier has tenure at his university, and what sort of flak he is catching from his institution and from his colleagues.

The book unfortunately lacks a bibliography and illustrations, but does have a number of excellent maps and a fine and detailed notes section.

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